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Follow-up actions to the recommendations of the International Conference on Population and Development

Statement submitted by Equidad de Género: Ciudadanía, Trabajo y Familia, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement*

Equidad de Género: Ciudadanía, Trabajo y Familia is a non-governmental organization of Mexico founded in 1996 by leading political, academic and social feminists. Since its founding, the organization has worked to develop and strengthen women's leadership in the promotion and defence of sexual and reproductive rights. Members of the organization have participated as official delegates to international conferences, including the International Conference on Population and Development, and its subsequent follow-up meetings.

The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development was groundbreaking when it was developed and continues to influence both government policy and non-governmental organizations' actions around the world. In the case of Mexico, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development has provided the framework for population policy and for many of the political agendas of feminist and women's organizations around the country.

The inclusion of the Millennium Development Goal target to achieve, by 2015, universal access to reproductive health, and its accompanying indicators, contraceptive prevalence rate, adolescent birth rate, antenatal care coverage and unmet need for family planning, is evidence of a growing recognition of the importance of reproductive health in reducing poverty and improving development outcomes. To this end, Equidad de Género welcomes "Contribution of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development to the internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals" as the theme for the forty-second session of the Commission on Population and Development.

Like many other Latin American countries, Mexico has been undergoing important economic, political and social changes in the last 30 years. Many of these changes have advanced women's rights and, today, Mexican women's social, economic and political participation is higher than ever before. At the same time, the percentage of young people to which Mexico is home is the largest in its history; however, it anticipates a decline in these numbers over the next 30 years and an increase in its elderly population.

The confluence of these phenomena requires an appropriate and adequate response by the Government of Mexico, including the development and strengthening of programmes, policies and norms related to sexual and reproductive health. It also requires recognition of the contributions of civil society organizations, something that the Programme of Action recognized from the beginning as necessary for achieving its objectives (chap. XV, sect. A, paras. 15.1-15.12).

For Equidad de Género, civil society organizations' most valuable contribution to effective public policy is as an advocate and watchdog, as has been the case in the work that Equidad de Género has carried out in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and more recently on behalf of the reproductive health target added to Millennium Development Goal 5. Particularly in regard to this target, Equidad de Género has focused its efforts on the indicators related to contraceptive prevalence and demand and adolescent pregnancy.

* Issued without formal editing.

In terms of contraceptive prevalence, Equidad de Género has long defended women's rights to high-quality, personalized and accessible family planning information and care and a full range of contraceptive options. Recent studies have shown that Mexican women are greatly interested in regulating the number, spacing and timing of the birth of their children, and it is crucial that the Government provide them with the adequate means to do so. This includes developing informational campaigns, investing in contraceptive methods and carrying out training for family planning providers. These mechanisms will aid in improving the rate of contraceptive prevalence among Mexican women.

Contraceptive prevalence is closely tied to unmet family planning need, and the strategies used to address one are applicable to the other. For instance, many women do not use contraceptive methods, not because they reject them, but because they are not adequately informed about them, or are not offered a broad enough range of such methods, or because they are uncomfortable with the service provided.

In 2004, Equidad de Género participated with other civil society organizations in pressuring the federal Government of Mexico to include emergency contraception and the female condom in Official Mexican Norm 005-SSA2-1993 for Family Planning Services and, later, in the Essential Medicines List. Equidad de Género followed up this successful advocacy in both 2007 and 2008 with a professional watchdog monitoring programme carried out in 40 local health centres in four States in order to ensure that emergency contraception was indeed available to all who requested it. The monitoring by Equidad de Género had the objective of investigating the degree of fulfilment by the Government of Mexico of its own internal norms.

The results of this monitoring revealed both cultural and institutional barriers to meeting contraceptive needs. For example, only 50 per cent of the public health-care centres had a stock of emergency contraception available, despite its being an obligation of the Government of Mexico, as stated in the Official Mexican Norm for Family Planning Services, to provide this medicine free of charge to the public in these centres. In addition, the lack of specialized training for health personnel constituted a barrier to women's and young people's access.

The results of this monitoring were presented to officials from the national and State ministries of health who committed to ensuring the availability of family planning methods, particularly emergency contraception, and to removing the institutional barriers mentioned. Though continued work is necessary to pressure the Government of Mexico to fulfil its own norms regarding family planning services, this type of advocacy represents an important step.

The topic of adolescent pregnancy is complex and is closely related to women's rights and development. It is also closely related to the other two indicators mentioned in that unmet contraceptive need is traditionally highest among adolescents and contraceptive prevalence traditionally lowest. In fact, in Mexico, the proportion of unmet contraceptive need among adolescents rose from 26.7 per cent in 1997 to 35.6 per cent in 2006. Equidad de Género works towards the reduction of the adolescent birth rate by advocating for comprehensive sexuality education and the establishment of youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services, both actions being included in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development. Unfortunately, conservative groups in Mexico, including the Catholic Church, have been among the primary detractors regarding such actions, at the

expense of young people's knowledge and awareness of sexual and reproductive health issues, including on how to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

The integration of the reproductive health and rights framework pioneered in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development into the Millennium Development Goal structure by means of the new reproductive health target for achieving universal reproductive health by 2015, has given organizations like Equidad de Género a new tool for engaging in advocacy and monitoring of Government institutions. The forty-second session of the Commission on Population and Development is an excellent opportunity to exhort Governments everywhere to invest in the reproductive health of their population and establish or strengthen programmes and policies. If governments are serious about development, they will take steps to ensure that the content of the goals of the Programme of Action do not remain on paper. The example of Mexico shows that the Government's commitment is only as strong as the demand for it and that civil society participation is fundamental to the fulfilment of objectives set forth in the Programme of Action. There is still a long road ahead, but the continued integration of the Programme of Action into internationally agreed development goals is essential for reaffirming this commitment.